

Subject: Scholes cabin 5: South Georgia

25 January 2010 1227 UTM -53.3889, -33.0022

Dear Mary and Stirling,

In the summertime, on the rare days when the sun shines, South Georgia must be one of the most beautiful places on Earth. We had one of those days.

This is not going to be a scientific email. For some things, science is simply inadequate and inappropriate. I will try to capture some of the splendour of South Georgia in words, and hope that the magic will last until I can show you the photographs.

I smelled South Georgia before we saw it. The ammoniac smell of millions of nesting seabirds wafted through the open sea-doors as we winched in the CTD at 500 AM, in dense fog a few kilometres off the coast. As we swung west to approach the fjord where Grytviken is located (the only inhabited spot on the island) the sun rose and the clouds parted. It was like the curtains rising and with the lighting focussed on some grand drama, to a backdrop of towering mountains and jumbled glaciers. For the first time in nearly two months, we saw a green-tinged landscape. The early light on the grassy slopes reminded me of those Robert Frost lines about Nature's first green is gold.

Entering the fjord, the swell abated and we cruised quietly past headlands, each revealing a new and more breathtaking vista. We finally anchored facing the rust-red remains of a disused whaling station and a white-steeped wooden church, nestled beneath ranks of snowy mountains, reaching nearly 3000 m in altitude. To our left, a white-palisaded graveyard, and to our right, the sheds and cottages of the staff.

Everywhere among the shipwrecks and post-industrial debris are King Penguins, Antarctic fur seals and Elephant seals.

One half of the Government of South Georgia (three people) came to greet us. The total population is sixteen, most of whom work for the British Antarctic Survey. The official, in a dry British way, described their system of rule as 'benign dictatorship'. Soon we were racing to the shore in inflatable boats, with six hours at our disposal. Most of the oceanographers chose to hike over the ridge into the next bay, because the weather was so glorious and what you miss most on a small ship is the chance to walk.

We passed the church, a simple Scandinavian wooden building that fits perfectly into this austere landscape, and followed a stream up through alpine meadows and over a scree of glacial rubble. Each upward step showed yet another series of high peaks and jostling glaciers. The valley on the other side cupped glacial tarns in meadows of springy moss, and then wound down through grassy knolls to a sea of tropical blue. The squeals, bellows and smells of a seal and penguin colony drifted up to us. The elephant seals and king penguins are both moulting. They spend about a month moping ashore,

quite un-inclined to move for anyone. The fur seals have pups and bark and snap at you with sharp teeth if they think you are too close. Relicts of the recapture of South Georgia, during the Falklands War in 1982, reminded us that it is not just seals that are territorial.

Back at Grytviken we had time to visit the small but beautifully-kept museum, and then make the half-kilometre pilgrimage to the grave of Ernest Shackleton; a simple block of rough-hewn granite, with some words of Robert Browning about never giving up. During his 1914 to 1916 expedition to try to walk across Antarctica, Shackleton and his crew were trapped for an entire winter in the pack-ice of the Weddell Sea, which eventually crushed his ship, the Enterprise. They dragged three small boats to the edge of the ice and sailed for the nearest land, Elephant Island. Shackleton sailed on in an open dingy, across 800 miles of the stormiest ocean in the world to South Georgia, landing on the west coast. He then walked, with three men, over the high mountains to this spot, where he began to organise the rescue of the men left behind on Elephant Island. He eventually achieved that with not a single man lost. Ironically, he died of a heart attack just off South Georgia a few years later, on his way back to Antarctica. He was buried from the simple whaler's church, in a small and quiet graveyard with an awe-inspiring view.

We sailed at 1730. This is our furthest point; the work is half-done. The entire journey would have been worth it for those six hours in South Georgia. Everything else is a bonus.

Love,

Bob